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Female gaze and subjectivity in *The murmuring coast*

O olhar e a subjetividade femininos em A costa dos murmúrios

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Abstract

The Murmuring Coast, a film by the Portuguese director Margarida Cardoso, is set in Mozambique, during the colonial war. Adapted from the homonymous novel by Lídia Jorge, the film depicts the life of Evita, who goes to the city of Beira to marry her fiancée, Luís Alex, a soldier fighting in the Portuguese army. However, she will find a different man, changed not only by war, but also by his captain's misogynistic views. I analyze the (im)possible negotiation and acknowledgement of female subjectivity in a universe ruled by men. Evita detaches herself from that society, obtaining a distanced, and therefore critical view of the war, of politics, and of the community around her. Her gaze is one of the main driving forces of the film, and the camera identifies with it, offering a female point of view to the spectator. Directed by a woman, the film shows us, through Evita's gaze, a female perspective on desire, subjectivity, history, and violence (not only against women, but against another race, another country and a different worldview).

Keywords

Female gaze | *The Murmuring Coast* | Margarida Cardoso | war and women

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Resumo

A Costa dos Murmúrios, um filme português realizado por Margarida Cardoso, tem lugar em Moçambique, durante a guerra colonial. Adaptado do romance homónimo de Lídia Jorge, o filme retrata a vida de Evita, que chega à cidade da Beira para se casar com o seu noivo, Luís Alex, um soldado do exército português. No entanto, ela encontra um homem diferente, mudado não só pela guerra, mas também pelas opiniões misóginas do seu capitão. Irei analisar a (im)possibilidade de negociação e reconhecimento da subjetividade feminina num universo governado por homens. Evita afasta-se dessa sociedade, desenvolvendo um olhar distanciado e crítico da guerra, da política, e da sociedade que a cerca. O seu olhar é um dos principais motores do filme, com o qual a câmara se identifica, oferecendo ao espetador um ponto de vista feminino. Realizado por uma mulher, o filme mostra-nos, através do olhar de Evita, uma perspetiva feminina do desejo, da subjetividade, da história e da violência (não só contra as mulheres, mas também contra outra raça, outro país e outra mundivisão).

Palavras-chave

Olhar feminino | *A Costa dos Murmúrios* | Margarida Cardoso | guerra e mulheres

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In her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," first published in 1975, Laura Mulvey explores the ways in which classic Hollywood narrative cinema constructs the gaze as male: the man is the active bearer of the look and woman an image to be looked at (2009, 19). The author identifies "three different looks associated with cinema: that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion." And Mulvey adds: "The conventions of narrative film deny the first two and subordinate them to the third, the conscious aim being always to eliminate intrusive camera presence and present a distancing awareness in the audience" (2009, 26). The use of invisible editing is one of the strategies used to hide the first two looks identified by the author (2009, 21).

In the wake of this groundbreaking essay, many feminist theorists and filmmakers began to interrogate the possibilities of a female gaze, and what that could entail.

In 1987 Teresa de Lauretis published *Technologies of Gender*, where she problematizes, among other things, female spectatorship and feminist filmmaking. She advances that

> I hasten to specify that the phrase "feminist cinema" is a notation for a process rather than an aesthetic or typological category: the notation for a process of reinterpretation and retextualization of cultural images and narratives whose strategies of coherence engage the spectator's identification through narrative and visual pleasure and yet succeed in drawing "the Real" into the film's texture" (1987, 115).

She notices that one of the consequences of Mulvey's essay was the suspicion of narrativity, and how there was the perception that "the common project of radical, independent, or avant-garde cinema in the sixties and seventies" was "the destruction of narrative and visual pleasure" (1987, 108). De Lauretis proposes instead that

> feminist work in film should be not anti-narrative or anti-oedipal but quite the opposite. It should be narrative and oedipal with a vengeance, working, as it were, with and against narrative in order to represent [...] the duplicity of the oedipal scenario itself and the specific contradiction of the female subject in it (1987, 108).

In a master class delivered at the 2016 Toronto International Film Fest, entitled "The Female Gaze", filmmaker Joey Soloway[1] advances that, as film critic Roger Ebert noted, film is an "empathy machine". One of the elements that makes film an empathy machine is precisely narrative and visual pleasure — that is, the power of storytelling:

> So the female gaze is not a camera trick, it is a privilege generator, it's storytelling to get you on somebody's side, it says you will be on my side, my camera, my script, my words. [...] The female gaze as a conscious effort to create empathy as a political tool (Soloway 2016).

Margarida Cardoso's debut feature film *The Murmuring Coast* (2004) achieves precisely that: the spectator empathizes with Evita, the main character, and accompanies the development of the narrative through her gaze. Soloway points out that another characteristic of films that privilege a female gaze is that they "use a kind of heroine's journey structure in looping around inside of the body, so it's not just about a feeling, but it's also a story, shape, where we reveal an ever more intense awareness of the protagonist's growing power" (2016). Evita, a young woman who arrives to the colonial city of Beira, in Mozambique, to wed the young Luís Alex, a young second-lieutenant

1 At the time of this address, Soloway still signed their first name as Jill, which they changed to Joey in 2020. The YouTube video, from 2016, still identifies them as Jill Soloway. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnBvppooD9I&t=7s, consulted on 2/04/2021).

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fighting for the Portuguese troops, is the heroine of the film, and it is her gaze that advances the narrative. In line with what Soloway describes as the female gaze, more than her actions, it is Evita's feelings that are prioritized on camera.

Even though the female gaze is not a camera trick, there are technical strategies that contribute to conveying that look. In her essay "Gender in Cinematography: Female Gaze (Eye) Behind the Camera", cinematographer Zoe Dirse points out that the film industry is controlled by men, which may be one of the main reasons why the gaze tends to be male. She advances that if women control the pro-filmic event, then the look of the camera is female — and by extension, the look of the audience can also be imagined as female (2013, 19). She emphasizes the importance of the cinematographer in creating a unique imagery to each film, and notes that the cinematographer's influence "can be great or small, depending on the relationship with the director and scope of the film" (2013, 16). The cinematographer of *The Murmuring Coast* is Lisa Haggard, who had already worked with Margarida Cardoso in her documentary *Kuxa Kanema: O Nascimento do Cinema*. It is also important to note that the film is an adaptation of the homonymous novel by Lídia Jorge (1988), where the narrative is told by Evita in first person. *The Murmuring Coast* is therefore invested in representing the journey of a female heroin through major contributions of other women (the writer, the director, the cinematographer). It is a film that asks the audience to empathize with Evita, to see her world through her eyes, to listen to her story told in her own words, and to feel what she feels. The use of subjective camera in the film is another important device to accomplish this.

When the Portuguese film *The Murmuring Coast* came out, it was the first to give an account of the Portuguese colonial war from a female perspective[2]. The film is set in Mozambique in the late 1960s, when the Portuguese were starting to lose terrain in the war. Mark Sabine points out the trans-ideological silence surrounding this moment of Portuguese history during the 1970s and 1980s, which was first challenged in literature, and notes that we can only define a literary boom on the subject in the late 1980s (2010, no page). Lídia Jorge's novel, in which the film is inspired, is part of this boom, and adopts a "palimpsestic testimonial format" (Sabine 2010, no page): the novel begins with a tale entitled "Os Gafanhotos" ("The Locusts"), supposedly written by a reporter, in third person, who will later interview Eva, the main character. The rest of the novel is Eva's comment, in the first person, on this tale that cloaks the events with a halo of harmony and happiness. Throughout the novel, Eva often questions her own point of view vis a vis the "truths" of the other characters, and their own versions of the story — and, to a further extent, the role of testimony in the construction of history:

2 In 1972, Sarah Maldoror directed *Sambizanga*, which depicted the Angolan liberation war from the point of view of Angolans. *The Murmuring Coast* is the first female account of the war from the point of view of a white Portuguese woman.

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> A fluid memory is all that lasts of any time, no matter how intense the feeling was, and it only lasts while it does not vanish into thin air. Even though, despite what one may think, it does not ignore History. I even find interesting the pretension of History, which is a game much more useful and complex than playing cards. But in this case, why do you insist on History and in memory, and ideas like these that unsettle so much? Oh, if you tell, tell just for the sake of telling, and it is all that is worthy and enduring from this effort (Jorge 2004, 42).

Here Eva does not dismiss the importance of history as an official narrative, but rather points out that there is never just one version or one memory, how everyone remembers an event from their own point of view, and how remembering is necessarily fictionalizing an event, to a certain extent. History as an official narrative has also been dominated by men, in particular during the Portuguese colonial empire. By pointing out the fluidity of memory, Eva is using "narrative and oedipal with a vengeance," just as De Lauretis argued, and throughout the film Eva deconstructs the traditional family and exposes the specific contradiction of the female subject in it.

In Margarida Cardoso's film, perspective and point of view then become central to the narrative and to the cinematic choices in the movie. It is Evita's gaze that guides most of the film, with an abundance of subjective shots so that the spectator can see the whole story through her own eyes. Evita "is like an intense eye, observing, nothing more than an eye" (Jorge 2004, 43). She travels to Beira to marry Luís and, once there, she encounters a society ruled by men whose power is present even when they are away in the battlefield. She tries to find her place in a new country, a new reality. She also gradually realizes that Portugal's colonial power is slowly crumbling, and with it the patriarchal society is shaken.

Traditionally, films about war epitomize a masculine point of view; women, while not forgotten, are nevertheless relegated to secondary roles. *The Murmuring Coast*, however, is a film about the war where a woman is the protagonist. Evita's gaze is the main mechanism through which the camera constructs subjectivity and which allows the spectator to perceive it. As Laura Mulvey observed, "It is the place of the look that defines cinema, the possibility of varying it and exposing it" (2009, 26). Evita's gaze is aware of its own positionally, as a white woman arriving in an African country. Her access to the realities of the colonized population, as well as to the actual battlefield, are limited and mostly second hand. There is an abyss that separates her from those realities, and she is aware of it — however, they are still a central part of her experience in Mozambique. The film reveals a self-reflexive consciousness of the limitations of Evita's gaze. It is not history played on the screen, but a (fictional) testimony, which is always subjective, that frames the narrative, right from the opening credits.

The film opens with homemade Super 8 images of Mozambique (according to the credits, they belonged to Lieutenant Colonel Morais Pequeno) of flamboyants, palm

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trees, aerial views of the coast, a plane arriving with soldiers and their families, people enjoying the beach, and other daily life scenes of the period. These images evoke a nostalgia for an ideal past, but the soundtrack, with Simone de Oliveira's 1965 song "Sol de Inverno", indicates that that reality is gone:

> Dreams I dreamt, where are they?
> Hours I lived, who has them?
> What is the use of having a heart and not having anybody's love?
> I live of missing you, love, life has lost its glow
> Like the winter sun, I feel no heat.

However, as Sabine notes,

> Cardoso's film addresses this scenario by first mimicking the iconography of colonial nostalgia (in particular, the vintage photo anthology, and cinematic depictions of the heroic white man in Africa), and then using (self-consciously incomplete) testimonial to interrogate these images and reveal the often unwitting and indirect colonialist violence that such nostalgic images expunge (2010, no page).

Therefore, the film interrogates, rather than cultivates, nostalgia. Simone de Oliveira's song is already signaling that interrogation. The previous sequence ends with an image of Evita in a bus, with young soldiers entering it — the image is treated to look like it was also filmed in Super 8 in the late 60s and ends with an image of a red Mozambican sunset. Just like the song points to the end of a love affair, the sunset points to the end of the day — reinforcing the idea that the film is depicting the last days of an era. The treatment of Evita's image to look like Super 8 footage highlights the fact that the film is a fictional construction, which therefore manipulates images to create its own narrative, and makes editing visible to the spectator.

Once the opening scene ends, Evita's gaze initiates the narrative. We see a bride in a hotel room, unpacking her suitcases, followed by a black screen subtitled: "Then, the bride, who had only arrived the night before, but whom everyone was already calling Evita, opened her eyes." The spectator follows her gaze in a match cut to the open sea, thus launching the narrative. The cinematographic process demonstrates self-reflexive consciousness: filming is a way of seeing and a way of making things visible. Before Evita opens her eyes and sees the ocean, the camera closes its "eye" as conveyed in the black screen. The spectator is reminded that this is not a typical Hollywood film in which invisible editing is used to offer a univocal story, presented as (fictional) reality. Mulvey notes that the use of invisible editing in classic narrative cinema is employed to give the male spectator the feeling of control (2009, 25). *The Murmuring Coast*'s editing, on the other hand, instead of blurring the limits of screen space, constantly points to

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them. Therefore, instead of denying the first two looks that Mulvey associated with cinema (that of the camera and that the audience), the film makes them visible.

The camera then travels from the ocean to Evita's face, which is covered by a bridal veil. Her eyes are closed. She opens her eyes and smiles at the groom who removes the veil and kisses her. The unveiling is not innocent. It is the moment when she starts to see a new Luís whom the war has changed. From this point onward she starts to gain awareness of a new reality, which spans the entire film. The use of veils, transparent curtains, semi-open blinds in the film is frequent — pointing to hidden realities, half-truths. Many of these "veil" scenes also use the subjective camera, and we see through Evita's eyes, spying, observing from afar. Other scenes are framed by open doors, windows, cement grid walls, framing what Evita and the spectator see, reminding us that the images in the screen are mediated by the camera, by the filmmaker, etc. These elements emphasize that cinema always has a point of view, and that the camera, just like the windows, doors, grid walls, frame reality and select a perspective. These shots also put the spectator in a position of spying, trying to make sense of what we see — in short, they put the spectator in a similar position to Evita's. Just like her, we slowly open our eyes to a reality that is still taboo in Portuguese society.

Immediately after the groom unveils the bride and both kiss, those attending the wedding — soldiers and their wives — applaud. All the men are wearing light khaki suits and the women wear yellow or pearl dresses. Yellow, as we will see, is a common color throughout the film. One of the soldiers has a bandage over one of his eyes (the same one who will later say that the screams of the people who found dead bodies in the bay were in fact the screams of the bride). The camera then cuts to a close up of a medium format camera, photographing the wedding. As the photographer takes pictures of the couple, we listen for the first time to Evita in voice-over: "I enjoyed reading your story and I came to the conclusion that many things are exact. What you intend to clarify you clarify, and what you try to hide remained submerged. You were right not to worry about the truth." Therefore, truth and exactitude are not necessarily the same. The medium format camera highlights a self-reflexive consciousness concerning the filming process, which always implies a point of view. We also have multiple stories: the one Evita tells on voice-over, the one we see on screen, the one the reporter tells, to which the voice-over is answering.

What Lídia Jorge advances in the book, and Margarida Cardoso in the film adaptation, is a depiction of female subjectivity outside the logic of patriarchal representation — more precisely, how a woman advances her individuality in an oppressive, sexist society. As I already noted, there was an abyss between the experiences of men and of women during the Portuguese colonial period: Portuguese women usually did not go to

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the battlefield[3]. When Evita arrives to Mozambique, she encounters a man changed by the experience of war, a man she no longer recognizes. Evita's gaze is a gaze of reckoning with a new reality— this is why the character is in almost every shot of the film but is also in silence for most of the time, only watching. Her silence is however relative, as her gaze is the main device that narrates and advances the narrative. We observe everything through her eyes, and more than her voice-over, it is her gaze that guides us.

The Portuguese fascist dictatorship was also a regime of silences, or of "murmuring," as the title evokes. When Evita demands a local journalist, Álvaro (who will later be her lover), to expose the story of the poisoned bottles that are killing so many Black Mozambicans, he answers: "I take my chances as far as I can. [...] Here you don't read, you interpret." Evita's interpretation of the reality is not the same as that of Luís or his Captain, who he so admires, Jaime Forza Leal. Nor is it the same as Helena, the Captain's beautiful wife.

Helena's character, to whom Evita cannot stop looking when they meet in the wedding, functions to a certain extent as a mirror image of her. Evita has a certain fascination by Helena, which may be understood as a way of negotiating female subjectivity in a phallocentric society. For example, after telling Evita that Jaime killed her lover in Russian roulette, Helena proposes an erotic relationship and asks: "Let's take revenge on them?" A relationship with Evita would be a way to escape her own matrimonial oppression. Evita declines, as such a relationship would not offer her any escape. On the contrary, revenge on their husbands, as the driver in any sexual encounter, would position the two men in the center of that relationship. Instead, she has an affair with the journalist precisely because he offers her the escape from Luís' sexist oppression. As Eva notes in voice-over, "I don't know what you were told, but the truth is that the journalist and I never went dancing nor ever dined by candlelight. We were together several times, that's true, but in other places." What brings Evita and Álvaro together is not the traditional romantic affair, but the fact that they see the world in a similar manner. It is Álvaro that shows a new side of the city to Evita, bringing her to places where the typical wife of a soldier would not go: the Moulin Rouge cabaret, or the slums where most Africans lived at the time.

Griselda Pollock noted the gendered division of spaces in modernity (2003, 78) and how public spaces, like the street, belonged to men:

> For bourgeois women, going into town mingling with crowds of mixed social composition was not only frightening because it became increasingly unfamiliar, but because it was morally dangerous. It has been argued that to maintain one's respectability, closely identified with femininity, meant *not* exposing oneself in public. The public space was officially the realm of and for men [...] (2003, 96-97).

3 A notable exception was the work of paratroop nurses.

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In Portuguese colonial society space was both gendered and racialized. The wives of the Stella Maris hotel are never seen outside its walls, and they occupy the traditional spaces of femininity, where they sow and embroider, chatter with each other, take care of their hair, nurse their babies. Helena too, at Jaime's request, agrees to never leave the house while her husband is away in a military mission. Before departing for the war front in Mueda, Luís asked Evita to do the same, never leave her room while he's way. Not only she refused, but she ventured through the city to spaces where she was not supposed to be. In the colonial city, the racialized spaces were particularly conspicuous, as the houses in the African neighborhoods were made of zinc and the roads were dirt roads, contrasting with the large asphalt avenues of the white city. While Luís is away, Evita discovers the city, often alone, sometimes accompanied by Álvaro.

The construction of female subjectivity and its agency melds with the camera. Through Evita, the director is negotiating a female position in a masculine world of oppression and violence. António de Oliveira Salazar's regime was traditional and the role assigned to women was that of mother and/or wife. Rights were so limited that even travel abroad would require the permission of men. Such submission is seen in the wives of the other soldiers who live in the hotel Stella Maris. While their spouses are away in combat, they engage in idle conversation or listen to stories about the jungle told by a Mozambican servant. Evita remains detached and doesn't conform to this female stereotype. Her failure to adhere to the norm in such a patriarchal cosmos has consequences. During her time in Mozambique, she strives to find her own space outside the controlling male power.

Evita, the women of the Stella Maris, and Helena shatter the idea of "woman as sign". Teresa de Lauretis notes that

> the female subject of feminism is one constructed across a multiplicity of discourses, positions, and meanings, which are often in conflict with one another and inherently (historically) contradictory. A feminist theory of gender, in other words, points to a conception of the subject as multiple, rather than divided or unified, and as excessive or heteronomous vis-à-vis the state ideological apparati and the sociocultural technologies of gender (1987, x).

While the wives of the military seem to conform to what a woman was supposed to be, we learn that they argue with their husbands in the intimacy of their bedrooms, or that they have affairs. Helena is a more complex character, who seems to accept every demand from her husband, but whose decision not to leave the house while he is away in battle functions as a kind of promise to have him die in combat, so that she can finally be free. It is only when she confides with Evita about her lover that we learn of her misery. In the end, she is the one who denounces Evita's affair with the journalist, as a revenge for Evita's refusal to have an affair with her. In such a sexist, oppressive society, one may wonder why Helena wouldn't stay on Evita's side. De Lauretis asks:

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what will persuade women to invest in other positions, in other sources of power capable of changing gender relations, when they have assumed the current position (of female in the couple), in the first place, because that position afforded them, as women, a certain relative power?" (1987, 17)

Being married to Captain Forza Leal affords Helena a certain power, especially in a colonial society, where she seems to enjoy all the privileges that whiteness and affluence afford her. She has a big house in front of the beach and is surrounded by servants who attend to every whim of hers. Furthermore, denouncing Evita to her husband is another away to ascertain power over Evita's body. She is complicit with the patriarchal order because she enjoys the relative power it affords her, and she seems willing to pay the price.

Captain Forza Leal and Helena can be understood as doubles for Evita and Luís. The fiancé looks up to his superior and wants to be like him. Forza Leal, literally "loyal force" in Portuguese, epitomizes masculine power and dominance. His wife carries the name of Helen of Troy whose significance does not escape Evita:

— Do you know what your name means?
— No.
— Haec Helena: "There's the reason for conflict." It has to do with beauty.

Helena's beauty is dangerous to those who become fascinated by it. When Forza Leal discovered his wife's affair, he forced the man to play Russian roulette with him. Helena was forced to watch, and the lover lost. When Luís tells the story to Evita, he lets her know that he is of the same mind of the Captain and sees it as the best solution. For the Captain, it was destiny that chose him over her lover — she had no say in the matter. A relationship that seems perfect at first glance is after all one of power and submission, where Forza Leal is in command and enjoys being the aggressor.

One of the most iconic scenes of the film portrays this kind of psychological violence against Evita and Helena. A few days after the marriage the couples decide to take a walk together. The restaurant where they would like to dine is closed and Luís suggests that they go "exercise [their] fingers." The Captain agrees but is reluctant to include the women. Helena says she does not want to go home, and the men decide to take them along. "Exercise the fingers" is a metaphor for shooting flamingoes in a nearby lake. When they arrive at the lake, Forza Leal takes something out of the trunk of the car wrapped in a blanket. In a game with Helena, he makes her guess what is in there. Although she knows the wrapped items are guns, she feigns ignorance. So he makes her guess which gun is missing. As she refuses to answer this last question, he screams at her so that she will tell. When she finally says, "a revolver" (the one that killed her lover) he makes her repeat it louder to assert his command over his wife.

During the scene, we see Evita who is detached from the group and closer to the camera. Such separation is maintained throughout the film. She never feels as a part of the group or an equal and the camera captures the distance. There is also a sudden gust of wind, foreshadowing the detachment between Luís and Evita and the mounting violence between the couples. In fact, the wind is present throughout the entire film, both as an omen of the end of Evita and Luís' relationship, and of the demise of Portuguese colonial rule in Mozambique.

They head toward the lake and Luís cocks the gun. Helena and the Captain are next to him, but Evita is slightly apart. The camera closes in on her face as she shudders, and we hear the shot. Her dress bears a print of yellow birds[4], which make her the symbolic target for these men: they are shooting the birds, but the violent act is aimed at her and Helena. Evita frequently uses two dresses with painted birds, which may recall a still life. Interestingly, the name in Portuguese for still life is "natureza morta" — "dead nature." In Helena's living room, there is a dried tree with embalmed birds. Her house is also decorated with hunt trophies (namely gazelles), however, these were left by the previous owners. The only animals Jaime and Luís hunt are harmless flamingoes. Mark Sabine notes that all these still lives and hunt trophies function as "parodies of the 'white hunter' and 'white ape-man' ideals", and that these are "graphic evidence of the frailties and failures of the Estado Novo's colonial project" (2014, 99).

When Luís prepares to shoot the flamingoes, the Captain's wife suddenly runs to the firing line as if to protect the birds while having the gun pointed at her. This moment captures the oppression felt by the women due to the machismo of their spouses. They have no escape. Much like the flamingoes, they are merely another hunt trophy for their husbands, as the painted birds in Evita's dress suggest. Seeing Helena's and Evita's discomfort invites spectator identification with them and disapproval of the shooting. The aestheticized violence is typical of action films in which we can witness the same kind of spectacle, where cars and buildings explode, villains die, all to produce a visual spectacle to entertain the viewer. Yet the audience is rarely asked to think ethically about violence. This is one of the most engaging scenes of *The Murmuring Coast*, where the beauty of the sequence offers visual pleasure to the viewer. Nonetheless, it is not the kind of aestheticized violence noted by Walter Benjamin in his essay "Work of Art in the Age of Reproducibility" (2006, 251-83), as practiced by the futurists and later on by fascist regimes. In these cases, there was an apology of violence and of war as a spectacle for itself that emptied all the ethical implications of such acts. In *The Murmuring Coast* something else is being done that precisely intends to criticize violence and war.

4 There are two dresses with birds in the film, one white with birds in yellow and brown tones, and the other in light khaki tones with the birds in brown tones. Both dresses were painted for the film by Portuguese fashion designer Lidija Kolovrat. Evita uses the khaki dress in her last visit to Helena's house, when the men have just returned from war and are burning compromising documents. In the Russian roulette scene with the journalist, she wears again the yellow dress from the flamingoes' scene.

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Though it is a beautiful scene in aesthetic terms, the audience is invited to think about it in a critical way.

The suggestion of horror is powerful. We never see a bird dying or being shot — we just listen to the shootings and see Evita's disgust. Once again it is her gaze that guides the spectator towards what is happening. Despite this being a film about war, we never see fighting scenes or any kind of overt violence. The viewers become aware of violence precisely because they are always expecting to see it (through the threatening way Jaime speaks to Helena and Evita, the shooting of the flamingoes, the couples' arguments heard through the walls of the hotel, etc.), and that spectacle is always denied to them.

The only images of the battlefield we actually see are photos kept by Helena. In one of Evita's visits to her while the men are away, the Captain's wife shows several photos of war operations to Evita and the camera does not dwell on the images, affording the spectator only a quick glance. One of the photos reveals Luís carrying a stick with the head of a Black guerrilla soldier. Suddenly, Evita comes closer to knowing her husband. We know more about the photos from Helena's descriptions of them than from actually seeing them. The director chooses once again to conceal visual violence, expressing it in words.

The same strategy is used regarding the cadavers of Black people who drank methyl alcohol believing it to be white wine. The bodies first appear in the dawn of the day after the wedding and all the inhabitants of Stella Maris come to the terrace and witness the tragedy. From the terrace, the camera films the corpses and so we can only see them from afar, almost indistinguishable in the distance. Like in classic Greek tragedy, obscene death is withdrawn from the spectator's gaze. Indeed, the etymology of "obscene" is "off-scene". The audience is only aware of what happened behind the curtain because one of the characters is narrating. Likewise, we know that the objects in the water are corpses because we are told so. We are also told that they drank methanol by mistake because someone bottled it in bottles of white wine, possibly with the aim of killing Mozambicans. Black pain has become a white commodity, but *The Murmuring Coast* avoids exploiting black suffering precisely because violence is never explicitly represented on screen.

All these episodes deal with the gaze, how it is presented or denied to the spectator. Hence, the pleasure of voyeurism in the film is often denied to the viewers, distancing itself once again from Mulvey's male spectator. Yet visual pleasure is not absent from *The Murmuring Coast*. Although the spectator does not see imagery of violence, he or she is nevertheless acutely aware of the brutality. And it is Evita's gaze, by way of the subjective camera, that unveils the realities of colonial Mozambique. In an interview (extras of the DVD), the director considers Evita (as well as Luís) a passive character, while Helena and Forza Leal are seen as active. In certain aspects, this is correct: Luís imitates his Captain and tries to be like him and Evita is, more than anything, an observer, a witness. Nonetheless, the gaze is usually associated with power and with an active

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role, as Mulvey pointed out. Evita may be looked at, but she observes, and it is her gaze that constructs the narrative. If speech has a performative value, being able to create new realities and not just describe facts, images are the language of cinema.

In a chapter entitled "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," part of the book *Reel to Real*, bell hooks states that "There is power in looking," and that the look can change reality (2009, 253). She continues: "Spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see. The 'gaze' has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally" (2009, 255). In this chapter, hooks advances the concept of "oppositional gaze": "critical black female spectators construct a theory of looking relations where cinematic visual delight is the pleasure of interrogation" (2009, 268). hook's ideas can also apply both to Evita and to the female camera in *The Murmuring Coast*. Both interrogate the official stories of Portuguese colonialism by offering an oppositional gaze. In fact, when Evita sees Helena for the first time, at her wedding, Luís admonishes her for her insistent stare at Helena: "Don't stare so much!", which posits on the act of looking an element of transgression. Evita's gaze is therefore political because it interrogates her reality and unveils to the viewer a different perspective of the war and of Portuguese colonialism.

In this film, Black characters are mostly silent and only act as extras in the film. In a personal interview (September 4, 2013), Margarida Cardoso explained to me that she could only tell her side of the story and that she didn't feel comfortable to portray a reality that she was not familiar with, that of Black Mozambicans during the colonial war. The filmmaker lived in Beira as a young girl in her early teens, during the same period depicted in the film. Racial segregation did not allow such a young girl to fully know the reality of Black Mozambicans. However, in two scenes Cardoso puts Black people looking back at the white colonizer. In one where Evita wanders alone around the city, she sees a man staring at her, defiantly, behind the trees of a house. Then there is a jump cut to Odília, Helena's Black maid, staring through a door threshold, and we hear Helena's voice telling Evita to come in. Odília follows Helena around the house, and exasperated, Helena tells her to go away: "Go away! You're like a shadow! This black woman's shape always behind me, reminds me of death or something of the kind." These two examples of Black people staring back point to the resistance of Black Mozambicans against colonialism — and to the threat their gaze is to the colonizer, as we see in Helena's reaction.

Another way Evita finds to escape the hotel and to learn more about Mozambique is through her relationship with the journalist, which is quite distinct from the one she has with Luís. They meet when she takes two poisoned bottles to the newspaper and asks him to denounce the killing. His name, Álvaro, is a synonym for purity. He is someone who is not tainted by war or by the desire to subjugate Mozambicans. He is also someone with whom she can find her subjectivity. Her relationship with the journalist reinforces the leitmotif of the doppelganger. Luís, before going to Mozambique to join

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the Portuguese troops, was a brilliant mathematician in quest of the harmony of numbers. But when Evita arrives to Beira, she will encounter him substantially changed, supporting the war and looking up to his Captain as an example to follow. He will try to make Evita be the same kind of wife he supposes Helena is. As Freud points out in his essay "The Uncanny", the doppelganger, that once represented an assurance against death, now represents a death threat:

> [T]hese ideas arose on the soil of boundless self-love, the primordial narcissism that dominates the mental life of both the child and primitive man, and when this phase is surmounted, the meaning of the 'double' changes: having once been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death (Freud 2003, 142).

The story of Helena's affair announces a similar end to Evita's relationship with the journalist. However, the ending is inverted: this time it will be the lover who survives. One surmises that the war deeply altered Luís' personality. Becoming a double of his Captain is for Luís a way to fight death by creating a new identity that conforms more to the ruling ideologies. Therefore, as Maria Alzira Seixo noticed, the colonial war works as an ideological tool:

> Then, in fact, war is not only a result of the clash of ideologies but is itself an ideological tool. Even in the individuals in whom it may work the lucidity and the resistance to created interests, it results in visible psychological transformations and may place these individuals at the same level as the others: war, or at least this kind of war (Seixo 2002, 54).

Luís has been ideologically converted to the fascist ideals, and to the idolization of violence. He will try to do the same with his wife but fails to do so.

Before their husbands come back from the battlefield, Helena tells Evita: "Now they are coming back. And they only bring death with them". Forza Leal is the active bearer of death, while Luís is the passive, as the Captain survives the Russian roulette whereas his soldier ends up committing suicide. Being a double then, though it might have seemed to Luís an assurance of immortality, becomes his death sentence. However, as the song "Sol de Inverno" announces in the beginning of the film, Luís was dead to his fiancée since she arrived. One of the verses of the song says, "your desire is dead, my desire lives on." Once again, the woman is given the active role; she is the one who desires — and therefore, the one with agency.

When Luís comes back from the battlefield, he looks traumatized, and tells Evita that the Portuguese are losing the war, but they are trying to show the opposite to the media. Highly significant is a press conference given by a blind General who praises the deeds of the Portuguese troops. His blindness is opposed to Evita's gaze. The film shows

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Evita's constant negotiation of identity in a world that is tearing apart. As Margarida Cardoso argues, the film is about loss of identity:

> This is, more than anything, a film about the violence of a loss. Evita's loss is in fact an identity loss, not knowing who she is in there. The film ended up being about this woman's journey into trying to understand and she goes further and further. She does not approach from inside, she is mostly influenced by external things. And this journey ends in a way that is not conclusive [...] (Cardoso 2004, online).

Later on, she will find in the newspaper a poem written by Álvaro that compares Africa to a woman being raped by the male Europe. Through this sexual metaphor, colonial relationships are thus genderized and oppression is thereby masculine, patriarchal. This parallels domination of women, and Evita is a good example.

She who bears the gaze has power. An older Eva narrates the events, looking back on her past and telling the spectator what happened. As pointed out earlier, the film starts as well with a female voice, right after we see the groom kissing the bride, with Eva's voice-over:

> [...] Do I remember Evita? Yes, I do. I still can see her today crossing the terrace of the Stella Maris hotel, and I quite esteem her, and, in a way, I even miss her, the time when she had an elegant waist. In those days, that was what I was called... In those days, Evita was me...

Someone else told the story and it is not the whole truth. Evita may have been passive while she was in Beira, but telling her version of the events makes her an active subject writing history. The journey to find her lost identity, which started in Mozambique, continues in the present moment of the narration, where she is still negotiating who Evita is after all. That is why the voice-over refers to her in the third person — precisely because what separates them is a process of acquiring knowledge, which in turn allows her to write history.

In the scene where Evita is forced to watch the Russian roulette between Luís and Álvaro, she notes that she was both a witness and an accomplice. She was also both in the context of the colonial war in Mozambique: she knows that despite her strong disagreement with colonialism, she played the role of accomplice. Nonetheless, the film, through Evita's gaze, denounces that system by demystifying whiteness, "since the lives [it depicts seem] less rooted in fantasies of escape" (hooks 2009, 269).

As so many feminists like hooks, De Lauretis and Soloway have stated, the personal is political. Evita's journey, Evita's gaze, are political. As Soloway advanced,

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> The female gaze is political protagonism and is not afraid to ask 'what is toxic masculinity? And when are we going to be done with it?' The female gaze is more than a camera or a shooting style, it is an empathy generator that says I was there, in that room (2016, online).

In *The Murmuring Coast*, Evita, her gaze, the camera, all construct gender as a form of resistance, of political agency, even if they do so in the margins of Portuguese colonial society. It is through their "micropolitical practices" that their construction of gender takes place:

> the terms of a different construction of gender also exist, in the margins of hegemonic discourses. Posed from outside the heterosexual social contract, and inscribed in micropolitical practices, these terms can also have a part in the construction of gender, and their effects are rather at the "local" level of resistances, in subjectivity and self-representation (De Lauretis 1987, 18).

The last image of the film is a flamingo soaring in the sky. Just like this magnificent bird, Evita managed to escape and start a new life elsewhere. It also shows that it is possible to negotiate female agency in an oppressive masculine order. Through Evita's gaze, we become both witnesses and accomplices of her journey, and we empathize with her story, with the way she looks at things.

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